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By Donna Jordan

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N.H. Congressman Charlie Bass visited Colebrook on Wednesday evening, where he hosted a Town Hall meeting. Congressman Bass has hosted several meetings throughout the state recently, including Jefferson and Hillsboro, and explained that he hosts the meetings as a way of getting feedback from his constituents on issues that they are facing in their communities.

In Colebrook, about two dozen residents were on hand to talk about several issues, including the Northern Pass and the proposed passenger train service to North Stratford. Bass opened the meeting by saying he wanted to address two issues head on—first, the Northern Pass. "Some of you may be here because you are concerned about that issue," he said. "As you know, Senator Ayotte and I wrote a letter to the Energy Dept. in order to get into the comment period for the project, and we expressed our opposition to this project in its current form."

Bass went on to say, "It is my opinion that this project should not be built unless it is manifestly supported by the people in each county affected by it and we are nowhere near that point right now. There is a lot of work that needs to be done. I will be working in opposition to this project until I get a message loud and clear from the citizens of this county that it is okay. I have studied this project, I met with the consulate from Quebec today, I am trying to understand all the factors involved. I have been going to some of the meetings. It is a project that does not accrue to the benefit of this region of the country."

The second issue he addressed was the federal budget—in particular Medicare.

"There is more misinformation passed out from this than I have ever seen," he said. "Medicare is a trust fund, it comes from the Medicare tax, and over the years, more people than ever are turning 65 and the cost of healthcare keeps going up and the average lifespan keeps going up," explained Bass. "That's the reason the program is not in balance. We have four options: we could do nothing; we could raise the Medicare tax—that's not a particularly good idea; we could cut benefits—that's also not necessary; or we could do some combination, which results in making the system much better than it is today—and that's where we are at," he said.

Colebrook School Board member Ray Gorman brought up his concerns about the No Child Left Behind Act, which Bass had supported when it was originally proposed "because it was a bipartisan bill to set a standard."

In the years since the bill passed, said Bass, "You reach a point that you can't meet the standards no matter how hard you try." He invited Gorman if he and other members of the school board could put together a note with two or three "practical" changes that they think would make the act better and send it to him.

Questions about the rising costs of gas and home heating oil created some discussions, as did immigration issues. But several in the room turned the conversation around to the Northern

Pass, and Bass further strengthened his position against the project as proposed.

When Pam Frizzell of Colebrook and Pittsburg expressed her concerns about property values and the future expansion plans her own family has, she said everything needs to be on hold because they just don't know what the future is for the routing.

"The secondary impact that this is having on this county and Grafton County is a tragedy," said Bass. "I have heard so many stories about individuals attempting to conduct real estate transactions or who lost a sale because of this— it's a tragedy. I don't know how it could have been avoided, but it's terrible."

Dave Enos of Pittsburg expressed his concern that the Northern Pass representatives are attempting to "barter" their way by offering to install broadband lines along with the DC lines.

"I will not support this project in any fashion unless it is manifestly popular," reiterated Bass. "It doesn't matter how much broadband they offer anywhere—it is about how you all feel about this. And if you don't like it, I don't like it. I am concerned that this county cannot be altered forever so as to provide electricity to some other part of New England, and I have a responsibility as your representative to defend that as best as I can. I don't support the project."

Chronicle Editor Charlie Jordan then asked Bass if he would support the concept of a passenger train service—after a study was revealed and reported on in the Chronicle on April 22.

Congressman Bass replied, "I have not heard about this—I am a long-time proponent of passenger rail. If I could influence this in any positive fashion I would do that. What we need for a line like that is a piece of legislation to give enormous flexibility to a community that would be different than any other part of the country. If I find out more about this project. I will talk to Rep. Frank Guinta (of Manchester) who has jurisdiction over the rail (in Congress)." He added, "You don't have to have big train stations, you just need to have siding available. I would love to take this on as a project," he said. "In American, if we had made the same commitment to rail as we did the highway system, we would have a great infrastructure. I feel the same way about the telephone system," he said.

At the end of the hour-long meeting Bass mingled a little longer with his local constituents and left town via Rte. 26, headed to Whitefield; Rte. 3 had just been closed to through traffic going south because of flooding across the road in Columbia.